

MANIFESTO

FOR THE

FREEDOM OF ATTENTION

In the present and worsening state of things, the faculty and the power of human desire suffers from monoculture – the over-cultivation of one or maybe two forms of desire, in addition to one or more primitive spasms of the brainstem that resemble but are not desire. The growing poverty of desire, and the growing poverty of answers to the questions that desire poses, resemble a landscape overrun by farmed ungulates, and scattered with shrinking islands of ecosystem, endangered networks of generosity, symbiosis, and trust, where other, rarer forms of desire and of being can take shape and grow.

Desire is impoverished, and it is fallen, and the grammar of desire too, both its call and its response. Instead, there is the continuous, circular generation and immediate satisfaction of miserable, debased desires.

Attention is the matrix of desire. It is that from which new and untried desires arise, and that to which they gratefully return, seeking consolation.

Attention is the dynamo of desire – the repetitive and assiduous movements of attention, departing from and returning to its objects, produce desire that takes the form of power.

In conjunction with its objects, attention is capable of creating new forms of desire. In each possible object of attention, a new, unthinkable form of desire lies in wait, to be brought to flower and fruition. To pay attention is to desire the unfolding of a person or a thing. The unfolding of a person or a thing is an essential good.



A thing that masquerades as freedom of attention is on the rampage. It resembles an infinitely scrolling buffet of choice, where even the most thrilling of confections are made up of the same dye and corn syrup as all the rest. Constant invitations to self-expression are instead solicitations to evacuate the self, in which, in the end stages, one simply arranges a series of attractive objects within the empty, bauble-be-decked frame of a thing that was once a person.

There are many reasons that we give up our freedom of attention. We do it to meet needs that have not always existed, but seem always to have existed; we do it for convenience, and because it is just so useful; we do it to gain or give access, to give or be given work; for knowledge and the illusion of knowledge; for community and the illusion of community; for shame. When we are presented with the temptation of giving up our freedom of attention (not freely and humanly to submit our attention, but instead to debase it) we have many options: refusal, consent, compromise, precaution; or faith, hope, love, grace.

True freedom of attention is a burden that uplifts its bearer. When it is first assumed, it feels like its opposite, like unfreedom. But in fact, it is what happens when a human in full and conscious possession of her freedom and power of attention forges a path through space, matter, ideas, and time; and it is what happens when a human in full and conscious possession of his freedom and power of attention chooses to follow and inhabit the paths made through space, matter, ideas, and time by the attention of another human.

Attention is a form of love. Yes – love, as one expects, is the answer. But we do not yet know what love is, or could be. Attention is falling in love with the truth, and afterward seeing its face and hearing its voice everywhere, including in untruth. Attention loves the real into existence.



Attention creates and nourishes new objects of desire, objects of experience, objects of knowledge, and objects of attention. It remakes the objects that already exist by remaking relations with and between them.

The house of attention has many mansions. Attention transforms mere points of space or points of reference into rooms, corridors, and labyrinths, and transforms objects of use into participatory landscapes. Attention is a trap door opening down. Anything, given sufficient attention, will open into an abyss of knowledge, experience, and desire.

Although attention is fundamental, and thus is tied up in basic human needs, activities, and uses, in its deepest nature it is an excess and a surplus, a generosity and an extravagance. In order to be applied in its fullest power, it must be sustained to the point of what appears like excess in any given situation.

Humans who do useless and extravagant things together in dead earnest – things that do not yet have names and to which these humans give names – are redeemed, which is to say that they create for themselves the conditions in which they might more fully become what they are, or what they could be.

END

